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THE IMPACT OF GAP YEARS ON CAREER PURPOSE AND EMPLOYABILITY

CHIARA DE ANGELIS

Work project carried out under the supervision of:

Professor Milton de Sousa

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Abstract

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The gap year is a growing practice in several countries. Numerous scientific articles demonstrated that it is an enriching experience. Following a qualitative method, this research analyzed the impact of one or more gap years on people's employability. In particular, it aimed to study the gap year influence both on students who have not entered the labor market yet and on professionals who have already undertaken a professional path. By investigating different aspects, the study found that this experience positively affects individuals' career and employability.

Keywords: gap year, employability, professional life, students, professionals.

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Introduction

An increasing number of people, principally students, decide to take one or more gap years in their lives. The growing gap year popularity among UK and US young people brings an increasing number of students embarking on this experience each year (Heath, 2007; Dawes, Johnston, Youngberg & Parrott, 2019). According to the statistics, the percentage of Australian school-leavers who took a gap year after high school raised from 10 percent in 1995 to 25 percent in 2006 (Curtis, 2004). Moreover, it is also spreading in other world countries such as China (Han, 2016). Gap years originated in the 1960s together with the hippy movement as a way to travel and meet new cultures (Guomei & Wei, 2017). The resulting popularity brought about the birth of the gap year industry, with the foundation of several companies whose purpose was to offer a gap year experience around the world to its clients. Nowadays, the gap year has also acquired valuable aspects in favor of career development. The current scientific researches agree that this kind of experience brings a wide range of advantages from both a personal and a professional point of view. Thus, taking a break may be productive to develop personal attributes and professional skills increasingly required by the current work world (Jones, 2004). Work organizations and the labor market are rapidly evolving. Often, University-leavers are not able to satisfy employers' expectations and meet the skills required by corporates. To this end, many recruiters look for graduates with life experience and extra-curricular activities that may provide them with a set of skills beyond the degree (Suarta, Suwintana, Sudhana, Hariyanti, 2017). In this international work context, the qualities developed by gap year participants are positively valued by human resource departments of enterprises (Guomei & Wei, 2017). The gap year is seen by recruiters as an increasingly interesting phenomenon that provides individuals with a set of soft, employability and personal skills (e.g. team-working, adaptability, problem-solving, etc). However, even if it has already been demonstrated that the gap year is a source of professional benefits, the current research on

that topic is still limited. Most of the literature focuses on students' gap year advantages. For this purpose, the present research aimed to assess the impact of gap year on people's employability on both students and professionals already active in the job market. In particular, it aimed to both confirm the results reported by previous scientific articles about the career advantages brought by the gap year to students and to also study if it may be a relevant experience for professionals' careers.

For that reason, the following research question was formulated:

“What is the impact of one or more gap years on individuals' employability?”.

Numerous steps have been followed in order to investigate this topic and to obtain significant results. In the next paragraphs, a description and an explanation of the procedure followed to conduct the study are reported. After the introduction, the literature review, the methodology, the findings, and the discussion sections are presented. Lastly, the conclusions represent the final part of this work.

Literature Review and Research Question

The Importance of the Gap Year

According to existing literature, the gap year can be defined as a period during which people take time and exert activities other than formal education or work (Tenser, 2015). The gap year is a period that can last from 3 to 24 months and can be done in the home country or abroad. It is a practice over which it is possible to be involved in a wide range of activities. Its main aim is to take a break from everyday life and live a different and meaningful experience. Taking a gap year during the University period or after high school is increasingly more common among students (Jones, 2004). It is becoming more and more frequent among people who have already started a professional career and, in particular, among researchers and academics (Guomei & Wei, 2017). Past studies found that a gap year benefits individuals by personal growth and

acquisition of several skills. Indeed, it allows young people to develop their identity and steers them in a more aware career decision-making process. It also advances individuals, thanks to the acquisition of soft, technical, and employability skills that they will use in their future work-life. It represents a valuable element to enhance the individual professional profile and improve Curriculum Vitae (CV) (Jones, 2004). In a recent study, Rabie and Naidoo highlighted that there are several perceived advantages among the gap year takers, which are mainly related to self-development, acquisition of skills, and personal growth. Furthermore, they underlined how an increasing number of young people take a gap year as an experience to choose their study direction and to develop their career (Rabie & Naidoo, 2016). It is also agreed that the gap year gives an extra-edge to individuals of different backgrounds (Heath, 2007). The students who have taken a gap year have benefited from an improvement in their academic performances and are more focused on their educational achievements (Jones, 2004). Moreover, 90% of the US students who take a gap year then decide to start a Degree program within one year after going back to their lives and 86% of them reported being satisfied with their career once they started to work (Knight & Ethan, 2018). Finally, from one study conducted on medical students, gap year takers developed higher emotional intelligence than their colleagues, meaning that they can better communicate, build strong relationships and be collaborative and cooperative (Shahid, Adams, 2020). Several international Universities such as Harvard University assess the gap year as a plus and valuable experience in the selection process. However, the literature also shows the importance of being involved in meaningful and productive activities in order to benefit from both personal and professional growth. A poor or not interesting gap year may produce reverse effects as it could be not able to provide any advantage nor valuable experiences to the individuals. Moreover, it may pose a few challenges to cope with which may bring the person to derail from the planned trajectory (Kaplan, 2020).

Employability

Employability is a dynamic concept and it is the ability to obtain and maintain a job over time (Romgens, Scoupe & Beausaert, 2019). In other words, it is the capability to be suitable for the work market. Hillage and Pollard refer to employability as depending on individuals' knowledge, skills, competencies, and attitudes. Indeed, those individual characteristics and personal attributes are fundamental to have successful performances in a stable occupation (Hillage & Pollard, 1998). These elements are also needful to allow individuals to face the ever-changing work reality and to prevent and/or quickly adapt to it. In this context, acquiring and maintaining knowledge, skills and competencies are extremely useful in order to be attractive in the labor market and to face its fierce competition. A recent research emphasizes the importance of employability skills' possession in order to have a competitive advantage on the work market, have success in the work-life, achieve professional goals, and have a career progression. It also puts in evidence that employers see as preferable candidates with better soft skills rather than focusing on the hard ones. Indeed, unlike hard skills, recruiters think that soft skills are more difficult to acquire and develop (Sarfraz, Rajendran, Hewege & Mohan 2018). As a consequence of that, an increasing number of educational institutions are creating educational programs aimed at the acquisition of soft and employability skills in order to ensure their presence in students' curricula. However, often employers evaluate the CVs characterized by only academic results as not sufficient. Thus, the presence of extra-curricular activities is favorably evaluated by many employers and it is used by several individuals to build a distinctive and more valuable professional profile (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). In this complex and increasingly competitive labor market, the gap year experience may be seen as an enriching curricular element by academic institutions and companies.

The Present Research

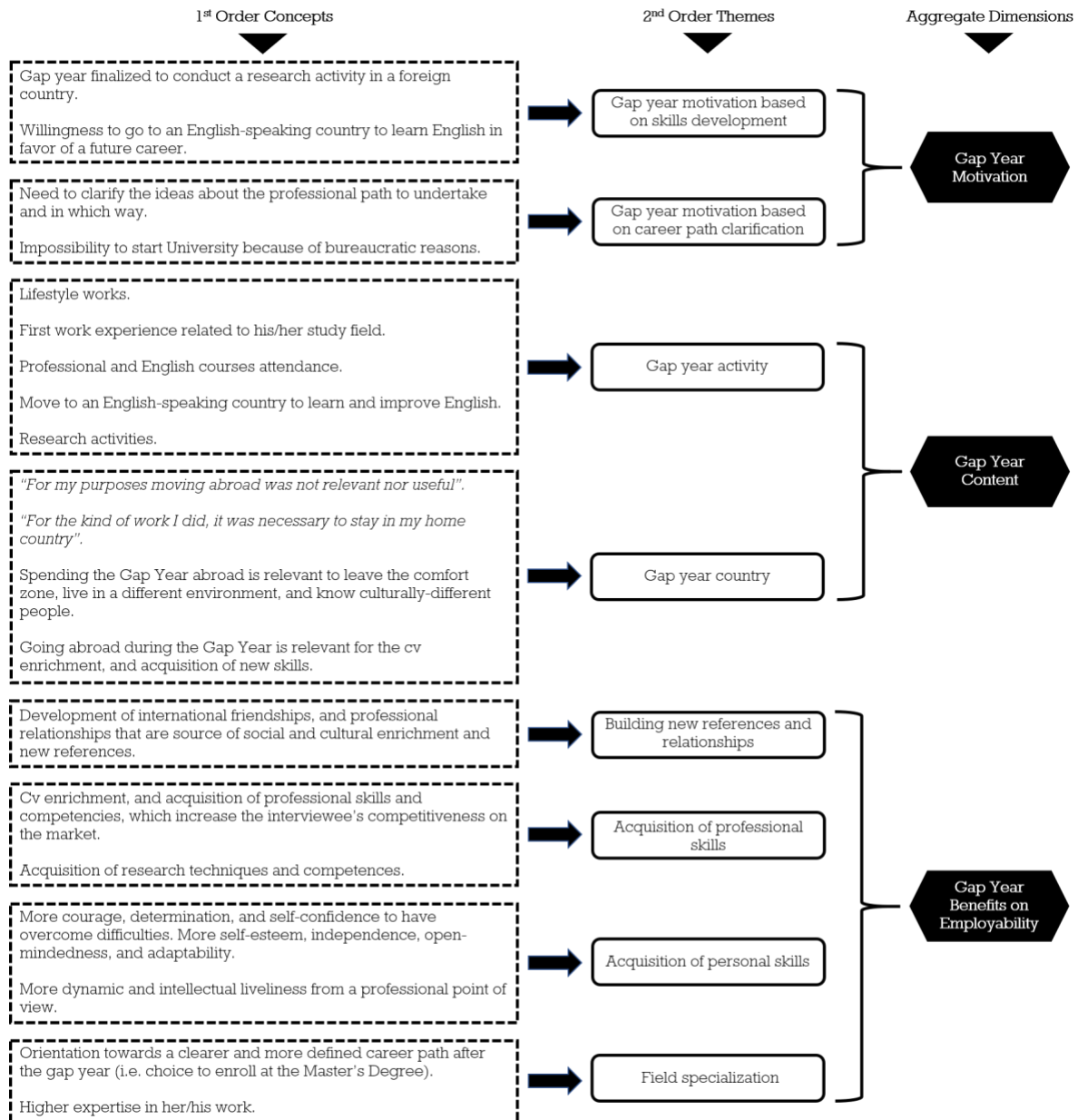
While the current literature mainly focuses on the importance and impact of the gap year experience on students' and young people's lives, this dissertation has the purpose to also study the gap year influence on adults' professional life. In other words, the main goal of this research is to study the impact of the gap year on the employability of students and professionals who have already undertaken a professional path. In this regard, the following research question was developed: "What is the impact of one or more gap years on individuals' employability?". In order to investigate that topic, the research was conducted by collecting data from semi-structured interviews with selected candidates. This process will be more deeply illustrated in the next paragraph.

Methodology

In order to provide broad insights into the relevance of the gap year in employability terms, an inductive method was applied. A grounded theory methodology was retained preferably to study the phenomenon of interest since it engages the "phenomenon from the perspective of those living it. This engagement with those living the phenomenon and attempting to understand it from their perspective is why GT is such a powerful approach for gaining new theoretical insights". (Corley, 2015). In particular, the Gioia methodology was employed to conduct the study. It was due to the methodology's well-recognized reliability and scientific rigor in building grounded theories within social and organizational fields. It is a qualitative method "designed to bring "qualitative rigor" to the conduct and presentation of inductive research." (Gioia, Corley, Hamilton & 2012; Corley & Gioia, 2004). This methodology relies on the assumption that the research's informants are "knowledgeable agents", namely, that they know what they are trying to do and can explain their thoughts, intentions, and actions. As a

direct consequence of that, the researcher makes no presumption to impose prior constructs or theories on the informants as some sort of preferred a priori explanation for understanding or explaining their experience. Thus, the phenomenon can be understood directly from the experience of those living it by structuring the collected data and figuring out relationships and patterns that bring to the formulation of new theoretically relevant concepts (Gehman, Glaser, Eisenhardt, Gioia, Langley & Corley, 2017). Finally, an inductive model that is grounded in the data (as exemplified by the data structure) is constructed, in a way that captures the informants' experience in theoretical terms. The resulting grounded theory model should transparently show the dynamic relationships among the emergent concepts that describe or explain the phenomenon of interest and one that makes clear all relevant data-to-theory connections (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2012). This method characterizes itself to proceed with progressive steps, moving from raw data to the building first-order codes, to second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. This process steers to the construction of the data structure, which may be considered as a static picture of a dynamic phenomenon, which is then represented with the subsequent model. From the model, then, the grounded theory descends, which represents the data-to-theory connection (Gehman, Glaser, Eisenhardt, Gioia, Langley & Corley K. G., 2017).

Figure 1 - Data Structure.



The Sample

The first step of the data collection was represented by the building of a sample. It was performed by interviewing 19 individuals among students and professionals who have taken one or more gap year within the last five years. This criterion was used in order to gather data that could be considered qualitatively relevant to the research. Since the current labor market

presents itself as rapidly-changing and constantly evolving, it was important to study the gap year impact on employability in relation to the current work market, while an experience lived more than five years ago could generate not-useful results to a correct assessment (Eurofound 2020). Therefore, the collection of too long ago data could represent a source of not significant information and therefore produce not-relevant findings. Among the interviewees, the shortest gap year lasted 6 months while the longest one lasted 3 years. The interviewees participated in semi-structured interviews, that were adapted to the peculiar characteristics of the interviewees. The reason for this format was motivated by the need to adapt the questions to the specific individual's situation and to receive retrospective and detailed elements from the interviewees. The sample can be divided into two sub-samples: the first category was constituted by Italian young persons between 18 and 26 years old (10 individuals, 7 women and 3 men) not entered yet into the labor market; the second category was constituted by adult persons between 30 and 45 years old (9 individuals, 4 women and 5 men) who had already undertaken a professional path before the gap year. In both samples, men and women were interviewed. The decision to consider two different categories allowed the evaluation of the gap year effects on career purpose and employability of both people who had already started a career and people who never had any professional experience. Each individual was asked to talk about the reasons behind his/her gap year choice, the activities in which he/she was involved, and the impact this experience had on his/her employability. The interviews were taken by videoconference and had a duration of 30-45 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed in order to analyze data. The reader may find the semi-structured interview script in the Appendix (Appendix B).

The Data Analysis

Once data were collected, the second step was the data structure building (Figure 1).

Following the Gioia methodology, the data progressively emerged from the interviews were organized into first-order and second-order categories and then assembled into a more structured form. The first-order concepts are represented in the first column of Figure 1. They were focused on the informants' terms and quotes, which were distilled into categories according to their analogies and differences. This is an informant-centric step that comes directly from the interviews' transcriptions. Some interviewees' quotes are reported in support of the data structure in Appendix 1. After the first step ended, the second step of this process was carried out. It was based on the development of second-order categories, which is a more abstract and theoretical level of concepts. Second-order themes are represented in the second column of Figure 1 and Appendix 1. At this point in the analysis, the emerged themes allowed the explanation and description of the observed phenomena by capturing the deeper meaning of the first-order concepts. Unlike the previous one, this is a theory-centric step. After this second-order analysis, concepts that were more suitable to describe phenomena come out, and they were further distilled into "aggregate dimensions". They are representative of a higher level of abstraction. In the data structure, there are three aggregate dimensions that are illustrated in the third column of Figure 1.

Findings

The data gathered from the interviews were used to build the data structure, from which 21 first-order concepts were generated. These were further grouped in 8 second-order themes and then in 3 aggregate dimensions, which summarize the findings of this study. The dimensions are representative of the three subsequent moments that characterize the gap year process and describe the entire phenomenon. The first dimension occurs before the gap year experience and

determines the second dimension. Lastly, the third dimension describes the consequences of the gap year practice on employability. It is important to dwell on each dimension in order to present the findings of each of them. Then, in the next paragraph, the reader will be introduced to the explanation about their interrelationships.

Dimension 1: Gap year Motivations

The first aggregate category is "Gap year Motivations". It can be considered as the research starting point. Indeed, it describes the reasons that oriented the study's participants to take one or more gap years. Therefore, they affected the interviewees by steering them towards a defined type of gap year experience. This category is constituted by 2 second-order themes, which are "Gap Year Motivation Based on Skill Development" and "Gap Year Motivation Based on Career Path Clarification". These 2 second-order themes were labeled from the data of the interviews, which resulted in the interviewees being divided into 2 main groups according to their statements around the motivation of the gap year.

Gap Year Motivation Based on Skill Development. This second-order theme is representative of those participants in the study who were pushed to this choice for professional reasons. To this group mainly belong middle-age and both-gender individuals, who had already undertaken a professional path before the gap year. "The gap year was finalized to learn and conduct research activities in a structure with high expertise and then reporting the learned competencies to my work." "I took a gap year to conduct a research experience in a foreign structure. At that point in my career, I thought that doing something for myself and being autonomous was relevant." From what can be deducted from the interviewees' quotes, they decided to take a gap year to conduct a research activity in a foreign University having high expertise in their sector of study. In addition to them, the rest of the people who belong to this group were young-people

and students who exploited the gap year to go to an English-speaking country to learn English in favor of a future career. “I took a gap year to go to an English-speaking country to learn English and then enroll at a Master’s Degree abroad.” Thus, this category explains that one of the reasons behind the gap year is represented by professional motivations such as the acquisition of skills useful for entering the work market or to acquire knowledge, expertise, and competencies for those who are already part of the work world. Indeed, these are characteristics even more valuable to enrich the CV, to be attractive to the employers' eyes, and to have career advancements.

Gap Year Motivation Based on Career Path Clarification. The gap year was a practice useful to clarify interviewees’ ideas about the direction to undertake for their professional future and it was one of the main reasons for which people decided to have such experience. Indeed, after high school and during the University years, many individuals had not clear in their minds their career choices. Most of the students questioned at least once over their academic path if they had made the right professional and academic choice. “I decided to take a gap year to clarify my ideas about future studies and to not make a choice that would have led me to waste money and time.” Often numerous individuals were undecided about what could be their career path or not-satisfied with the direction they had undertaken. “I made this choice after high school because I was not certain about my future professional career. Therefore, I preferred to take the time to clarify my ideas and decide the professional path to undertake.” In this context, the gap year represented for them a break during which they could think about their future, be involved in activities, and have experiences that could be helpful for them. Lastly, among those who belong to this group, there were also 2 persons who took a gap year because of the impossibility to be enrolled at their Universities and decided to spend that period being involved in useful and meaningful activities that could give them advantages from a new experience (“The reasons

were mainly related to bureaucratic issues which did not make it possible to start studying at the University”).

Dimension 2: Gap Year Content

With the aim to achieve their goals and to live a particular experience, the “Gap Year Motivations” led the interviewees to choose to spend their gap year by being involved in defined activities in a selected country. The data related to the gap year experience are defined in the aggregate category named ““Gap Year Content””. It may be seen as a consequence of the “Gap Year Motivations” and an element affecting the gap year outcomes.

Gap Year Activities. The activities in which interviewees were involved during that period were different and varied. They were dependent on the “Gap Year Motivations”. Indeed, those people that took a gap year for professional reasons were involved in activities such as: a) research projects and initiatives characterized by the acquisition of skills and competencies; b) the attendance of professional and English courses; c) work experiences related to the own field of study. “I went to a Parisian University to work for a research team. I went there because they have high expertise in my field of study.” “I worked and attended courses to improve my English knowledge.” “I worked in a sector related to my area of study.” On the other hand, those people who took a gap year motivated by the need of personal and career path clarifications decided to spend this experience by having activities aimed to personal growth and ideas elucidation about their future. In particular, most of them were involved in lifestyle works in their home country or abroad in order to earn a minimum wage. “At the beginning of my gap year, I went to Australia, where I did several jobs. Then, in the last months, I traveled over a few countries.” “I did lifestyle jobs.” “I did things unrelated to my current work activity.” However, it is important to highlight that those activities related to English learning in an

English-speaking country, to professional courses attendance and to work in a sector related to their own field of study were exerted by individuals belonging to both categories (i.e. gap year based on skill development and gap year based on career path clarification). Indeed, they all evaluated those activities as relevant and useful to achieve their goals. In particular, those activities were assessed as useful for the skills and competencies acquisition by those who took their gap year for professional reasons. On the other hand, those who took a gap year for career path clarification saw them as potentially useful for understanding whether to continue with the already undertaken path or approaching a new one.

Gap Year Country. The country where people spent the gap year is an important aspect of the “Gap Year Content”. It depended on the motivations of the interviewees and on the activities in which they decided to be involved for reaching their objectives. “The country depends on individual goals. For my needs, it was important to go away from my home.” Hence, some of the participants of the study retained to spend their gap year abroad as important, and in some cases indispensable, in order to have valuable benefits from their activities, and in particular for the CV enrichment and acquisition of professional skills and competencies. “Going abroad may bring you some advantages because it could allow you to learn a new language and develop new skills”. “I think the country is a determining factor from a professional point of view. Making a gap year in your own country does not allow you to enrich the CV as much as going abroad. I think that going abroad is also crucial for increasing employability.” Moreover, they stated that this choice allowed them to benefit from personal growth, leave their “comfort zone”, live in a different environment and know culturally-different people. “If I went back in time I would repeat the choice to go abroad. I think that going abroad is important to leave the comfort zone and live a more stimulating experience because of the fact of living in a different environment and with different people.” On the other hand, among the interviewees, 4 out of

19 did not want to live their gap year experience in a foreign country. In this regard, some of them stated that: "For my purposes moving abroad was not relevant nor useful" and "For the kind of work I did, it was necessary to stay in my home country". Thus, few persons did not consider going abroad as more valuable than staying in the home country. However, even if the interviewees took different decisions about the country where to go, they all stated that this choice mostly depended on personal characteristics and it was not always essential to go abroad to have benefits. "You don't necessarily need to go abroad. I would recommend to you this experience even if you decided to do it in your own country." "It is not necessary to change the country to live an intense experience, but a gap year abroad may bring advantages such as learning a new language. However, the choice of the country where you spend the gap year depends on the type of career you want to undertake."

Dimension 3: Gap Year Benefits on Employability

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of the gap year on employability. Thus, the most important part of the questionnaire was finalized to investigate that. The "Gap Year Content" was crucial to correctly assess this aspect. For this purpose, the third and last aggregate category of the data structure was "Gap year Benefits on Employability", which describes 4 second-order themes.

Acquisition of Professional Skills. The primary benefit of the gap year is represented by the acquisition of competencies, professional and employability skills. These characteristics were particularly profitable in terms of CV enrichments. Indeed, these new elements benefited the individuals by giving them the opportunity to apply for more and much remunerative job positions. "In terms of employability, after the gap year I have been benefited by a wider range of opportunities. My competitiveness on the international market has also improved". It was particularly true for those interviewees who acquired a proficiency English level and higher

expertise in their current position, with related higher wages. “It has been a positive experience because I have enriched my professional competencies, and improved my English.” Furthermore, the acquisition of professional skills was particularly applicable for the interviewees who spent their gap year to conduct a research activity in a foreign University. Indeed, they could benefit from the increase in their research skills thanks to the development of new research techniques and the increase of expertise in their field of work. “It has been a positive experience because I have enriched my professional competencies, and improved my English.”

Moreover, after the gap year, some of them could exploit the opportunity to work both in the research field or in their current sector. “At a curricular level, the gap year has been productive. My employability has increased. Indeed, now I have more paths that I can undertake.” All these features allowed them to boost their competitiveness in the international and ever-competitive work market. “I think my employability has grown because I have acquired the skills to work abroad.”

Building New References and Relationships. Among the gap year advantages, there is the building of new personal and professional relationships. The involvement in new activities was a possibility for the gap year takers to develop relations with new people, which in some cases evolved into true friendships. “I have developed many personal relationships and acquired new friendships, which is helpful both from a personal and professional viewpoint.” Some interviewees stated that the gap year abroad represented for them a chance to meet new cultures and know people coming from different countries and continents. All these elements made the gap year an opportunity for developing cultural and social enrichment. “The gap year brought me to have relationships with people from all over the world. It has opened my mind.” Furthermore, if these relationships were matured within a professional environment or in a

productive context, they also represented a source of professional references and collaborations useful to build a professional network. “At a professional level, the gap year has been productive for the relationships and collaborations that I have developed.”

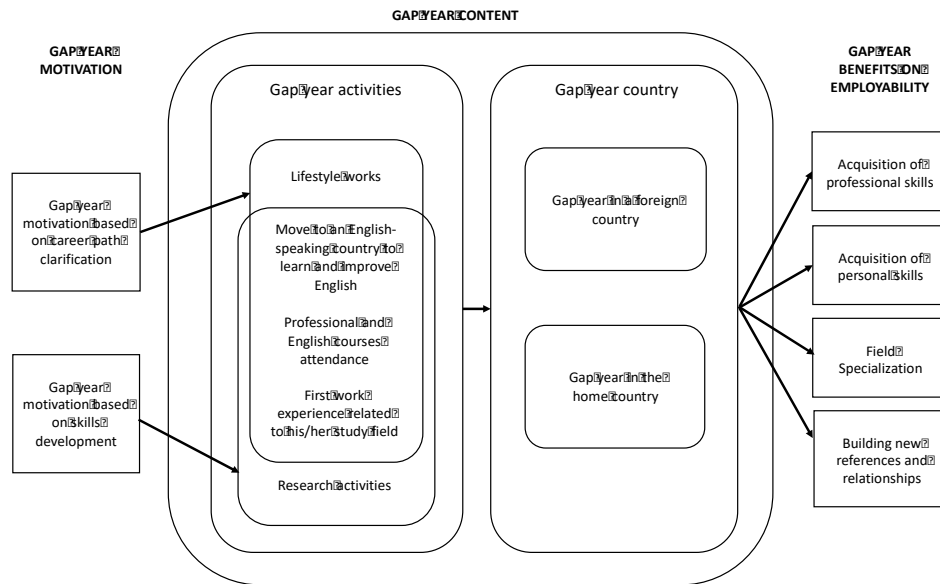
Acquisition of Personal Skills. The gap year was for the individuals an occasion to grow up and mature by the implementation of personal qualities and skills (Johan, 2009). The acquisition of personal skills is a common attribute that was mentioned by all study participants. “This experience has made me grow up. It has helped me to become independent and to make me understand what opportunities to take.” Some additional concepts mentioned by the interviewees are the following: “The gap year has widened my career horizons and opened my mind. I consider that as personal enrichment.” “I developed more self-awareness and self-confidence. Moreover, it has allowed me to take the time to clarify my ideas about the path to undertake.” “Now I feel more self-confident because I left my comfort zone and overcame several difficulties.” “It has led me to benefit from a decrease in anxiety and to be more responsible.” “I have acquired more self-confidence and became autonomous. These elements allowed me to grow up and have then been positively reflected at a professional level.” From those sentences, it is clear that the gap year allowed them to mature and increase some personal attributes such as courage, determination, self-confidence, higher self-esteem, independence, open-mindedness and adaptability. Moreover, other words that were pronounced in this regard were about the flexibility and intellectual liveness, that brought them “to become faster and more intellectually dynamic. Thus, it represents a plus for my career.” It is important to highlight how all these elements made the gap year an extremely and undoubtedly productive practice for the acquisition of personal benefits that positively reflect on a professional viewpoint.

Field Specialization. The last second-order theme describing the relevance of the gap year on employability is related to the field specialization. It refers to two different conditions afferent to the two different above-mentioned reasons that pushed the interviewees to take one or more gap year. First of all, it is important to emphasize that this condition was particularly true for the professionals who exploited the gap year from a work viewpoint. Indeed, this practice allowed them to benefit from an enhancement in professional skills and competencies related to their current work and so to boost their professional expertise. "The gap year improved my expertise in the research field." All these characteristics raised their professionalism and their attractiveness, bringing them to benefit from career progression and from the possibility to work in the academic field. "It has enabled me to specialise in the research field." On the other hand, the individuals who decided to take one or more gap year for a career path clarification exploited this experience to clarify their ideas and to be involved in activities that could in any way orient themselves towards a clearer and more defined career path after the gap year. "The gap year has oriented me towards a path that I like and which is closer to my interests." "Now my ideas are clearer and I think that what I am doing is the best way to do what I want to do and to work as a musician. So this experience has steered me to specialize in this sector." Indeed, after the gap year, all the interviewees made choices that led them to undertake a path finalized to career development. Many of them decided to enroll at the University or to specialize in a more defined field within their sector of study by starting a new Master's Degree or a Ph.D. program. "In consequence of the gap year, I decided to get a Phd. So it has brought me to specialise in a defined research field". "The gap year has brought me to enroll in a Master's Degree. Hence, it has led me towards a more defined career path."

Discussion

The Model

Figure 2- Theoretical Model.



Once the construction of the data structure ended, it was possible to develop the model that is at the basis of the grounded theory (Figure 2). The model is a picture that captures the dynamic behind the phenomenon. It is the representation of the dynamic interrelationships among the concepts that emerged in the data structure. As a consequence of that, it should be possible to individuate new insights to formulate novel theoretical concepts.

The starting point of this model is given by the “Gap Year Motivations” that indirectly affects the interviewees’ employability and that can be considered as a sort of pre-gap year category. Indeed, it originated before the gap year experience and orientated the individuals to plan a gap year content that could satisfy their aims and would meet the needs that pushed them to that experience. The “Gap Year Content” was a consequence of what interviewees defined as their

“gap year reasons” and then what they did in response to them. Data analysis showed that the two sample categories were distinct in their motivations for undertaking the gap year. The students were mainly motivated by career path clarification while adults were all motivated by skill development related to their career.

These different “Gap Year Motivations” directly impacted on the “Gap Year Content” since this second category was determined by the precedent one. Hence, the choice of the gap year activities was subsequent to the definition of the gap year motivations. At the same time, the country’s choice where experiencing the gap year depended on people’s goals and activities. As an example of that, those who decided to take a gap year to learn English for study and professional reasons oriented themselves to move to an English-speaking country to work and attend courses. Finally, at the end of the gap year experience, the interviewees reported their perception about the effect on their employability. All the interviewees perceived that the gap year experience generated direct and indirect elements that positively influenced their employability. In the model, this positive influence is reported in the last part of figure 2, named “Gap year Benefits on Employability”. It is a post-gap year category since it arose after the gap year experience and as a consequence of the “Gap Year Content”. Indeed, the elements gained by participants once their gap year ended are descended from the activities in which they were involved. In particular, the gap year experience benefited individuals because of the acquisition of professional skills and building of new references and relationships, which allowed them to improve their CVs, increase their competitiveness in the international labor market and widen their work opportunities. Moreover, the development of personal attributes, such a higher self-confidence, adaptability and determination, may be seen as a relevant element that reflected also on the professional level. Last but not least, the higher field specialization given by the

increase in the job expertise and the orientation towards a more defined professional path is a more positive element in favor of respondents' employability.

Summarizing, what comes out from the model is that the gap year has a positive impact on people's employability. Indeed, even though the gap year motivations have been different among the study participants, they have all gained benefits for their professional life after the gap year.

Limitations and Future Research

Even though the wide range of ages may be seen as a possible limitation for data interpretations, it is important to highlight that it was a characterizing element of this research and it was due to the specific purpose of this study. Indeed, it aimed to assess the gap year impact on employability and career of professionals who had already developed a professional career and on students who had not yet entered the labor market. Thus, the sample was built by the constitution of two sub-samples consisting of people meeting these requirements. The sample's characteristics need to be evaluated by taking into account the mentioned elements. In these terms, it may be considered as a first study on the gap year effects on employability of individuals with different motivations and characteristics. However, future research may focus in more detail on the single sub-categories that constitute the study's sample.

The present study was conducted on a sample of only Italian individuals. It would be relevant to consider that people from different cultures and social habits may assess and approach this experience differently. Hence, it may represent a possible limitation that could not allow the generalization of the research's results to persons from different geographic areas. This aspect could be a useful element to bear in mind account to provide additional insights in future research. Furthermore, it is important to note that the present research does not cover some

additional gap year elements that may lead individuals to undertake this experience. Those aspects could be, for example, interest in new cultures and different populations and the willingness to travel and live in other continents and areas that are far from where you live. Indeed, the fact of embarking on a gap year to undertake any form of travel is a common feature of the contemporary culture and among the young people in many world countries (Harmer & Rogerson, 2017). However, those items were not the aim of this research and, they have not been explored in this dissertation. Although they have not been treated in this context, they are interesting aspects that could be investigated in future researches.

Conclusions

“In my professional life, I often hear gap-year students say that they favor the term “bridge year,” because the very term “gap year” suggests a void or an absence of something substantive, and they feel instead that it is pivotally transformative” (Tensen, 2015). As reported by Lori Ilene Tenser in her study in 2015, still today a large number of people continue to consider the gap year as an unproductive activity. However, the current literature and the present study show completely different results with all the gap year takers who declared that it was an important and enriching life experience. Indeed, to the question “If you could go back, would you repeat the choice to take a gap year?”, all the interviewees answered positively, with some of them even answering that they are taking into consideration another gap year period in the future. Other than evaluating the impact of the gap year on employability, this thesis was conducted with the aim to understand which are the main elements that make the gap year meaningful in terms of professional and career levels. This research aimed to give weight to the single interview’s words about their experience and on why they perceive that as worthwhile. From this dissertation, it is evident that the gap year has a positive influence on people’s employability, which is due to more elements that all favorably impact on it. This is

demonstrated by the results obtained in the following four categories: a) “acquisition of professional skills”; b) “acquisition of personal skills” that positively reflect on the career level; c) “building of new references and relationships”; d) “field specialization”, that positively but in different ways impacted on all the individuals.

In conclusion, this dissertation complements the existing literature by confirming the gap year professional benefits on students and provides new insights about the gap year relevance on professionals. Indeed, all the interviewees reported that this experience generated for them more than a positive aspect that has directly or indirectly benefited their professional path.

On one side, the professionals who had already undertaken a career before the gap year have benefited from career progression and more lucrative and satisfying job positions. On the other side, the interviewees who took a gap year as students or high-school leavers have taken advantages in terms of a wider range of work opportunities, the possibility to apply for more lucrative and competencies-requiring work positions, a more defined career path to address and a higher capability to face job interviews.

Taking into account the mentioned benefits, the present research strongly encourages people to take a planned gap year to develop and improve their professional life and also recommend companies, Universities, research institutes and institutional organizations to incentivize and develop well-structured gap year programs both for young people and adults in the light of the mentioned personal and professional benefits generated by this kind of experience.

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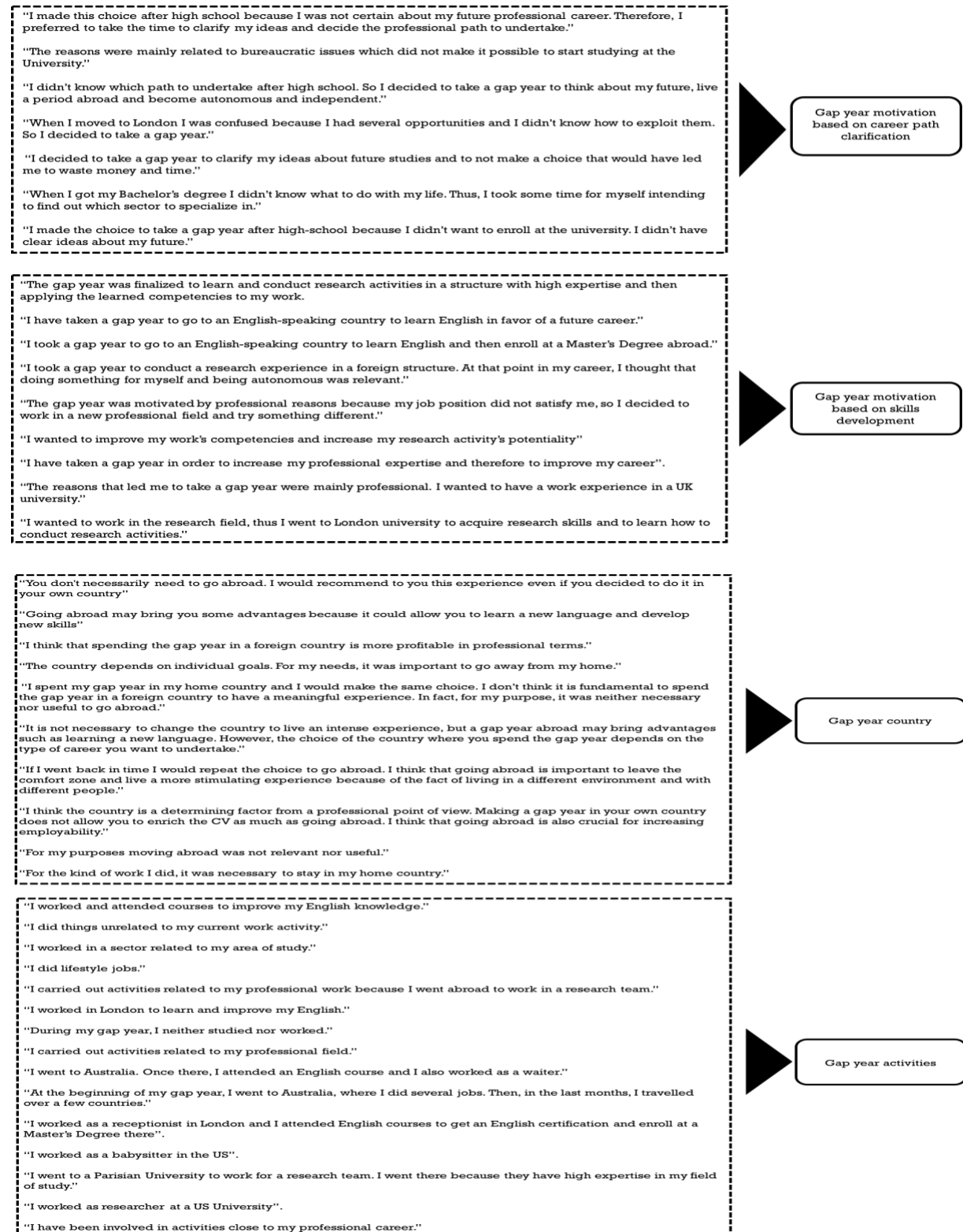
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Appendix

Appendix A: Interviewees' Quotes



"It has been a positive experience because I have enriched my professional competencies, and improved my English."

"In terms of employability, after the gap year I have been benefited by a wider range of opportunities. My competitiveness on the international market has also improved."

"My employability is considerably higher than before because I have acquired new skills and because I can now work both in the research field and as a doctor."

"The gap year has positively impacted my employability because now I can work both in the Research field or in the Hospital."

"At a curricular level, the gap year has been productive. My employability has increased. Indeed, now I have more paths that I can undertake."

"After the gap year, my employability has increased. The gap year has given me the possibility to apply for new positions. It has been a relevant experience for my cv."

"It will help me to find a future job and to face future interviews."

"I think my employability has grown because I have acquired the skills to work abroad."

"I have significantly improved my English. It has increased my employability because now I can also go to work abroad."

Acquisition of professional skills

"The gap year has widened my career horizons and opened my mind. I consider that as personal enrichment."

"This experience helped me to become faster and more intellectually dynamic. Thus, it represents a plus for my career."

"I developed more self-awareness and self-confidence. Moreover, it has allowed me to take the time to clarify my ideas about the path to undertake."

"Now I feel more self-confident because I left my comfort zone and overcame several difficulties. It has led me to benefit from a decrease in anxiety and to be more responsible."

"I have acquired more self-confidence and became autonomous. These elements allowed me to grow up and have then been positively reflected at a professional level."

"It has led me to be more curious and to always research new professional and mental stimuli."

"This experience has made me grow up. It has helped me to become independent and to make me understand what opportunities to take."

Acquisition of personal skills

"The gap year helped me to understand the path to undertake."

"The gap year has oriented me towards a path that I like and closer to my interests."

"In consequence of the gap year I decided to get a Phd. So it has brought me to specialise in a defined research field."

"The gap year improved my expertise in the research field."

"Now my ideas are clearer and I think that what I am doing is the best way to do what I want to do and to work as a musician. So this experience has steered me to specialize in this sector."

"The gap year has brought me to enroll in a Master's Degree. Hence, it has led me towards a more defined career path."

"It has enabled me to specialise in the research field."

Field specialization

"The gap year brought me to have relationships with people from all over the world. It has opened my mind."

"At a professional level, the gap year has been productive for the relationships and collaborations that I have developed."

"My employability has grown because I have developed new skills. Moreover, this experience has increased my references."

"I have developed important professional collaborations that have improved my research work."

"I have developed many personal relationships and acquired new friendships, which is helpful both from a personal and professional viewpoint."

Building new references and relationships

Appendix B: Semi-structured Interview

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW
<p>PLEASE SPECIFY YOUR NAME, AGE, GENDER, NATIONALITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ When and how long was your gap year?✓ Which was your job before your gap year? Which is your job now? Did you have any change in your career after your gap year?✓ Which were the key reasons that pushed you to take a gap year? Were the reasons behind your gap year related to the development of professional skills or to the career path clarification?✓ What did you expect from your gap year? Were your expectations positively confirmed?✓ Do you think your gap year has had a positive impact on your employability/ future employability? In which terms? In which way the gap year has been relevant for your employability?✓ Would you state that your gap year has triggered any relevant change on your career purpose and professional life?✓ Would you state that your gap year has generated a positive impact on your private life that has then been reflected on your professional career and employability?✓ Has your gap year generated any monetary changes from which you have benefited once back at work? In which way the gap year has impacted in your economic situation?✓ In which kind of activities have you been involved during your gap year? Have you been involved in activities close to your professional career?✓ Would you recommend the gap year to other people? If you could go back, would you repeat the choice to take a gap year? Do you consider the possibility to take a gap year again in the future?✓ Did you spend your gap year at your home or in a foreign country? If you could go back, would you repeat the same choice? Do you think that spending a gap year abroad may positively impact the career purpose and employability?✓ Would you state that your work-life balance has improved after your gap year?✓ Do you have any other consideration on the impact of the gap year on your professional career that could be relevant?

Appendix C: Participants Demographics

Name	Gender	Age	Gap Year Duration	Occupation Before Gap Year	Occupation After Gap Year	Gap Year Motivation
Alessia	F	37	1 year	Doctor	Researcher	Skills development
Felice	M	36	1 year	Doctor	Researcher	Skills development
Maddalena	F	32	18 months	Doctor	Researcher	Skills development
Michele	M	45	1 year	Doctor	University Professor	Skills development
Niccolo'	M	33	1 year	Employee at an Italian company	Bachelor's Degree student	Skills development
Onorina	F	33	1 year	Doctor	Researcher	Skills development
Paola	F	42	9 months	Doctor	Researcher	Skills development
Piero	M	36	1 year	Doctor	Researcher	Skills development
Roberto	M	33	1 year	Doctor	University Professor	Skills development

Name	Gender	Age	Gap Year Duration	Occupation Before Gap Year	Occupation After Gap Year	Gap Year Motivation
Bianca	F	26	8 months	Bachelor's Degree student	Employee at an English company	Career path clarification
Bianca	F	25	7 months	Bachelor's Degree student	Master's Degree student	Career path clarification
Fabiana	F	25	1 year	Bachelor's Degree student	Master's Degree student	Skills development
Fabio	M	23	1 year	High-school student	Bachelor's Degree Student	Career path clarification
Giacomo	M	19	1 year	High-school student	Bachelor's Degree student	Career path clarification
Gianluca	M	25	11 months	Bachelor's Degree student	Master's Degree student	Skills development
Giulia	F	23	6 months	High-school student	Bachelor's Degree student	Career path clarification
Margherita	F	23	6 months	High-school student	Bachelor's Degree student	Career path clarification
Stefania	F	25	1 year	Bachelor's Degree student	Master's Degree student	Career path clarification
Valeria	F	24	3 years	High-school student	Bachelor's Degree student	Career path clarification